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ABSTRACT

Interpreters theatre is proliferating on college campuses, has been made a national forensic activity for schools, has been the topic for recent workshops in the elementary grades, and is being used by the professional theatre to fill a large gap caused by the need for new written material and by competition from films. This paper explores the reasons for this widely expanded interest in interpreters theatre during the past 15 years, discusses the key roles played in interpreters theatre by imagination and words, and describes several recent, successful interpreters theatre presentations on Broadway. (JM)

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INTERPRETERS THEATRE
THEATRE OF THE WORD

Leslie Irene Coger

What is the essential nature of Interpreters Theatre? What makes it unique in the field? Some fifteen years ago I asked myself these questions and the answers were publiched in the Quarterly Journal of Speech under the title "Interpreters Theatre, Theatre of the Mind" and later the ideas were incorporated in The Readers Theatre Handbook. Today I want to talk about Interpreters Theatre -- Theatre of the Word. What is the state of Interpreters Theatre now? Has it changed?

Essentially, the strengths found in it in the early sixties are its strengths now. Its presentational form invokes a participatory audience who, stimulated by words of effective story tellers, create characters in action in a setting in their imaginations. The major change in these past fifteen years has been its widely expanded field. Let us concentrate on this point and the causes for it.

We are aware that Interpreters Theatre is proliferating on the college campus. It has been made a National Forensic activity for high schools. More and more children's plays are following the storytelling format. Within the last year I have given three workshops in Interpreters Theatre for grades kindergarten through sixth. Now the professional theatre is filling a large gap with Interpreters Theatre. First let us look at what has caused this

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gap and then productions that are helping to fill it. For the last two decades theatre seems to have turned from words. There has been a dearth of new written plays. The form or shape of the written play as known in the past has been largely ignored. Or writers, (and good ones) like Ionesco, Beckett, and Pinter have given a chartless world where the actor's inventiveness must fill in large voids in the writing, must fill in long pause. Growtowski, Chaikin, Scheckner and others have stressed group devised performances, improvisational theatre, theatre that is evoked by their company working together, working off each other, theatre that would be difficult or impossible to pass on to other groups to do because it is not written. This "body" theatre has given competition to the written play.

A second force at competition with professional theatre that has become very strong in the last few decades is film, both movie and TV film with its facile movement through space and time.

To meet these problems, the need of more new written plays and film competition, Broadway has followed two courses; one, it has revived many of the older successes of the theatre: CHERRY ORCHARD, ROMEO AND JULIET, THE NIGHT OF THE IGUANA, THREE PENNY OPERA, to name a few. The other course it has taken is to turn, and quite successfully, to what we call Interpreters Theatre. Let us look at some of these. Eudora Welty's short story "The Robber Bridegroom" directed by Gerald Friedman had a good run on both coasts. Maintaining the epic mode, this presentational theatre had direct contact with the audience as well as interaction of

characters onstage. The actors played many roles. When they were not in the scene they were grouped about the stage in view of the audience. The staging consisted of some kegs, a few boards, a bench or two and some sawhorses that became everything from a pulpit to a bridge over a small stream. Eudora Welty's story came excitingly alive on stage in Interpreters Theatre form.

Another example, and incidentally, one of the most moving productions on Broadway in 1977, is FOR COLORED GIRLS WHO HAVE CONSIDERED SUICIDE: WHEN THE RAINBOW IS ENUF written by the American writer, Ntozake Shange. Consisting of prose narrative and poems describing the life and problems of colored girls, it is movingly spoken and danced by seven gifted black girls, who sometimes interact but often sit about the stage more or less as an extension of the audience, listening intently as one girl tells her story, vividly suggesting all the various people who are part of it. At one moment during her narrative the audience, hanging on her words, give an audible "umph" from deep inside themselves at a very painful, dramatic moment in the narrative. On a bare stage, encircled with black drapes with only one abstract rainbow on the back wall, these girls, in simple bright dresses, make us see tenement rooms, filthy pavements, and a wide range of characters. The words reign supreme. Imagination fires imagination and these storytellers seeing the scenes vividly in their minds cause the audience also to live and breath in that environment.

"A Nightclub Cantata" also has elements of the Interpreters Theatre medium as the actors sing and chant and speak words by

Sylvia Plath, Carson McCullars, and others. Again, they are on a bare stage conjuring worlds for the audience to participate in.

In the 1973-74 season, Neil Simon adapted the stories of Chekhov into a narrative play THE GOOD DOCTOR. The writer, Chekhov, moves in and out of the stories as the narrator, interacts with the characters and talks to the audience. This very successful production used a few set pieces but did not strive for realism. It relied on words to set the scene.

Another recent production was SYLVIA PLATH: A DRAMATIC PROTRAIT presented by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1973 and, of course, we are all aware of the similarities of Equus to this medium. Recently, the Town Hall in New York has started presenting musical comedies in concert form, including "She Loves Me" and "Knickerbocker Holiday." These are but a few of the many productions being presented showing something of their range and scope.

Interpreters Theatre performances are aiding professionals to meet the competition of "body" theatre and the film by returning to the stage the "word". A comment of Walter Kerr is pertinent here.

He said:

> Words, those strangely supercharged constructs by means of which a sustained intellectual intensity is generated, are not only the original tool of the theatre; they are the only remaining tool of theatre, the one means the stage has of coping with-maybe even whipping - the competition. The

> stage can't compete visually; its got to compete verbally.... (these words) have got to be better than what comes in spurts, between tumbling images, from the screens.

Kipling summed up the power of words when he said, "Words are, of course, the most powerful drug used by mankind." Interpreters Theatre draws its force from the power of words.

These professional productions point out not only the power of the written word to conjure the action but also to set the scene with the imagination. Interpreters Theatre doesn't avoid the realistic set to save money, but uses the suggestive set for its freedom. This free setting, as Robert Edmond Jones would say, is addressed not so much to "the outer eye which observes but to the inner eye which sees." As facilely as the film changes, the actors create and shift their surroundings with the aid of words and the imaginative participation of the audience, the same factors that Margaret Webster calls for in the staging of Shakespeare. "Some scenes" she says, "are pure poetry and never touch the earth .... How could such scenes be matched by anything other than the creative imagination that inspired the writing?"

What are the new dimensions of Interpreters Theatre? If there were time I could speak of new ways of approaching rehearsals, sensitivity and kinesic exercises, metaphorical staging and new means of adapting scripts to reveal narrator - character relationships. Just know that a greatly expanded audience finds Interpreters

Theatre's ability to enthrall undiminished. The power of the spoken word is reaffirmed with each successful production.

Well-written literature, provactively staged, calling for a participating audience, can, as Jason Epstein says, give us "without (our) in the least knowing it at the time, a taste for reality and the holiness of the imagination operating at the far edges of human experience."